



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update #2

February 2007

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Thank You For Participating!

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. This plan will guide the management of the Refuge for the next 15 years. As part of this process, we have been seeking public input on management issues, concerns, and opportunities. This planning update provides information on the status of the planning process and what we have heard from people so far.

In August 2006, the Service mailed approximately 450 copies of Planning Update #1, along with a comment form, to local conservation and interest groups, conservation and research organizations, local, state and federal government agencies, Tribes, and others who have expressed an interest in the planning process. The planning update was also posted on the Refuge website and was available at the Refuge office, the visitor contact station, and the hunter check station. Planning Update #1 described the CCP process, Refuge purposes, draft wildlife, habitat and



Dusky Canada geese. (Photo courtesy Montana Waterfowl Foundation)

public use goals, and preliminary issues to be considered in the CCP. More than 90 of you returned comments describing your concerns and providing suggestions for managing the Refuge.

This second planning update summarizes the comments received, and lists primary management issues that will be used to draft management alternatives and refine draft goals and objectives. We would like to thank everyone who has provided comments and we invite you to continue sharing your ideas with us. Your participation continues to be critical to the success of this planning effort.

What were your concerns for the Refuge?

The public scoping period for preparation of a draft CCP and EA for the Refuges opened on August 2, 2006 and ended on November 3, 2006. Two public meetings were held: in Ridgefield Washington on September 14, 2006, and Vancouver, Washington on September 20, 2006. At the meetings Refuge staff and the lead planner explained the CCP process; Refuge purposes, vision, and management; and preliminary management issues, concerns and opportunities that had been identified early in the planning process. They also answered questions from attendees and took written comments. A total of 44 private citizens and representatives from various organizations attended the meetings, providing comments on the
(Continued on next page)

What were your concerns? (continued)

issues and opportunities presented. During scoping, a total of 92 written responses were received from individuals or organizations. Some comments were about broad or long-range issues, while others suggested very specific or detailed strategies that could be used to achieve biological or public use objectives. The CCP planning team reviewed and categorized the comments under seven major planning issues described in this update. For those who would like to see a detailed description of comments received during scoping, we have posted a Scoping Report on the Refuge website at <http://ridgefieldrefuges.fws.gov>.

Many comments came from people who visit the Refuge to observe and photograph wildlife, or to hunt waterfowl. Most of the comments suggested changes to public use programs on the Refuge, for example: expanding the areas where wildlife observation and photography, waterfowl hunting, and hiking are allowed; altering timing or location of public uses to reduce user group conflicts; expanding interpretation and environmental education programs; providing more volunteer opportunities; and partnering with other agencies and organizations that have common goals for the lower Columbia River ecosystem.

Many comments were also received on topics related to wildlife and habitat, including restoring native habitats of the lower Columbia River ecosystem (including the possibility of dike breaching to restore floodplain habitats), invasive species control, improving or expanding waterfowl habitat, and concerns about the impact of development near the Refuge.

Due to the high level of interest, all of these issues will be considered in detail in the CCP. We are currently using your comments to develop preliminary management alternatives and refine draft goals and objectives. Many of your comments will also be helpful in developing strategies to meet the Refuge's biological and public use goals and objectives as the CCP process continues.

Vision Statement for Ridgefield NWR

Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge is a place where people of all abilities can experience nature and share their outdoor traditions with others. This island of habitat with its rich diversity of floodplain forests, freshwater marshes, and meadows, will continue to sustain thriving populations of wintering dusky Canada geese, migrating waterfowl, and other wildlife. With collaboration from our conservation partners, the Refuge will apply sound, scientific principles to sustain the long-term ecological health and integrity of Lower Columbia River floodplain habitats; expand environmental education; encourage participation in wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities; protect and interpret unique cultural resources; and foster natural and cultural resources stewardship. As the rural character of the landscape changes, the Refuge will become even more important to wildlife and those seeking to understand our natural and cultural heritage.



Above: Dusky Canada geese on their breeding grounds in Alaska. Providing wintering and migration habitat for this rare subspecies is one of the purposes of Ridgefield NWR. (Glenn Chambers/USFWS)

What are the key issues for the Refuge?

Issue 1: What percentage of the Refuge should be maintained as intensively managed habitats that primarily benefit migrating and overwintering waterfowl, and what percentage should be native habitats of the historic lower Columbia River ecosystem?

A recurring theme in your comments was the proper balance between intensively managed habitats such as wetlands, pastures, and croplands (which primarily support waterfowl) and native habitats, for example riparian forests and wooded wetlands, that benefit neotropical migrant birds and other native species. Some respondents felt that the Refuge should be primarily managed to benefit waterfowl, while others felt that restoring native habitats should have higher priority.

Providing food and habitat for dusky Canada geese and other migrating and overwintering waterfowl is an establishing purpose of the Refuge. Purpose species will receive enhanced consideration in the CCP. The Service also has a mandate to restore native biodiversity where feasible. The percentage of the Refuge's acreage where native habitats will be maintained or restored, versus intensively managed habitats, will be considered in developing alternatives. We will examine alternatives that restore native habitats of the historic lower Columbia River ecosystem where good opportunities to do so exist, and such restoration will not adversely impact the Refuge's ability to manage for purpose species.

Issue 2: What are the most appropriate strategies for controlling invasive species on the Refuge?

A number of respondents stated that control of invasive/exotic species is a critical issue. Species of particular concern included Himalayan blackberry, reed canarygrass, and nutria.

The control of invasive species has been, and will continue to be a major management focus for the Refuge. Invasive species affect the Refuge's ability to manage habitat for waterfowl, and to restore native habitats such as Oregon white oak woodlands and bottomland ash forests. One of the key questions that will be considered in developing refuge management alternatives is which areas will be prioritized for treatments and whether those treatments will involve eradication or suppression.



Peter Gebhardt/USFWS

Oregon white oak on a rare snowy day



Ryan Hagarty/USFWS

Red-legged frog



Tim Bowman/USFWS

Horned lark



J&K Hollingsworth/USFWS

Columbian white-tailed deer

Some key considerations in the CCP are the Refuge's role in restoring and maintaining native biodiversity, and the Refuge's role in recovering rare and listed species native to the lower Columbia River ecosystem.

Issue 3: What is the Refuge's role in assisting in the recovery of threatened and endangered species native to the lower Columbia River ecosystem?

While only two comments specifically suggested reintroducing rare or listed species (western pond turtle and Columbian white-tailed deer), there was significant support for restoring native biodiversity on the Refuge. The Refuge is currently developing a plan to introduce two endangered Willamette Valley plants to the Refuge. In addition a proposal has been raised to reintroduce Columbian white-tailed deer (from the endangered lower Columbia River population) to the Refuge. The establishment of additional viable, secure populations could allow this species to be removed from the endangered species list.

In keeping with the Service's mandate to restore native biodiversity, we will consider reintroduction of native species where habitat is suitable and reintroduction will not hinder management for the Refuge's purpose species.

Issue 4: How shall the Refuge address the impact of increasing development of adjacent lands on its wildlife and habitat?

Given current trends, it is likely that within the next few decades the Refuge will become an island of habitat surrounded by developed areas. Several respondents were concerned about the impact of development on wildlife and habitat. Some suggested purchasing land to provide a buffer between the Refuge and developed lands.

The Refuge's priority for expansion is for acquiring land inside its existing approved acquisition boundary if funding becomes available and there are willing sellers. While the Refuge has no authority to control activities on adjacent lands, development surrounding the Refuge will be addressed in the CCP since it affects our management decisions.

Issue 5: How shall the Refuge monitor for contaminants and address contaminant and water quality issues?

Several respondents expressed concern over the cumulative effects of recent development on water quality in Gee Creek. Changes and impacts to natural watershed conditions are expected to significantly increase over the next 20 years due to population growth in the area.

The CCP will address the protection and restoration of instream habitat on the Refuge (Gee Creek and Campbell Slough). The Gee Creek Watershed Restoration Project, developed by the Service in 2005, will expand watershed-wide restoration efforts to maintain and improve water quality and stream habitat.



Mouth of Gee Creek (Lynn Cornelius/USFWS)

Issue 6: How shall the Refuge address increasing visitation and demand for wildlife-dependent recreation, especially waterfowl hunting, wildlife observation, and photography?

Because so many comments on this issue were received, they are organized into subthemes here.

A) Impacts of increased visitation

Many respondents were concerned about the impact of increased visitation on wildlife, habitat, and the quality of visitor experiences. Given current trends, it is likely that Refuge visitation will increase significantly over the next 15 years. Congestion on the auto tour route, conflicts between user groups, law violations, and wildlife disturbance will become increasingly pressing issues. While most respondents felt that increased public use could be accommodated without adverse impacts to wildlife and habitat, several respondents disagreed and stated that public use should remain at current levels.

The CCP will balance the needs of wildlife with our legal mandate to provide wildlife-dependent public uses. Adverse impacts to wildlife and habitat will be considered when analyzing the environmental impacts of each alternative, as well as in compatibility determinations which will be updated as part of the final CCP. Key questions that will be addressed include: which areas of the Refuge should be open to public use and which areas should remain undisturbed sanctuary? how much use can the Refuge accommodate? and how should Refuge usage be balanced between different user groups?

B) Waterfowl hunting

Most waterfowl hunters requested expanded and/or improved hunting opportunities on the Refuge. They had numerous suggestions, which fell into three major categories:

- Expand the hunt area
- Increase the number of blinds
- Increase and/or improve waterfowl habitat, or provide more food (i.e. grain crops). Current habitat conditions favor less desirable species.

A significant number of waterfowl hunters stated that traffic on the auto tour route decreased the quality of the hunting experience and suggested that the tour route be closed or changed during the hunt season.



The Refuge provides many wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, from waterfowl hunting to environmental education.
(USFWS Photos)

Waterfowl hunting is one of the establishing purposes of the Refuge and therefore will receive enhanced consideration in the CCP. Expanding and/or improving the quality of the waterfowl hunt program will be considered in alternatives development. The environmental impacts of each alternative, and the staffing and funding required for implementation, will be analyzed. The planning team will explore ways to decrease conflicts between hunters and users of the auto tour route.

C) Nonconsumptive uses

Many respondents requested that the area, timing, and facilities dedicated to wildlife observation, photography, and hiking be expanded. Suggestions included: allowing access to hunt areas on non-hunt days; allowing access to currently closed areas using guided tours; and adding or modifying viewing structures. Many respondents advocated for expanded environmental education and interpretation programs on the Refuge, including additional staff and facilities to support these uses. There was limited interest in establishing or expanding other recreational opportunities.

In the CCP/EA, all public uses will be reviewed for appropriateness and compatibility. Expanding public use programs on the Refuge by increasing the area and/or timing of use will be considered in alternatives development. As with hunting, the environmental impacts of each alternative, staffing, and funding will be analyzed. Compatibility determinations for all public uses will be updated as part of the final CCP.

D) Accessibility

Several suggestions were made to increase accessibility of the Refuge's public use facilities, for example installing additional restrooms, installing more benches along trails, improving hunt blinds and trails, and replacing the footbridge to the Carty Unit.

Providing accessible wildlife-dependent recreation is a priority for the Refuge. The Refuge plans to replace the footbridge to the Carty Unit when funding becomes available.

E) Volunteers and Partnerships:

There was considerable interest in expanding volunteer opportunities on the Refuge. There was also considerable interest in developing new partnerships (or strengthening existing ones) with organizations that have common goals for the lower Columbia River ecosystem.

The Refuge currently relies on volunteers to conduct many programs and activities. However, the Refuge's ability to fully utilize volunteers has been limited by lack of staff time available to manage the volunteer program. Staffing and funding required to implement an expanded volunteer program will be analyzed during alternatives development.

Issue 7: How shall the Refuge protect its significant archaeological and historic sites? What level and type of cultural resources education should be provided to the public? How will the recently completed Cathlapotle Plankhouse fit into interpretation and education programs on the Refuge?

Several respondents stated that cultural resources interpretation and education (using the Plankhouse) are very important, and would like to see the Plankhouse open or staffed more often.

The Cathlapotle Plankhouse has been a great success, attracting at least 10,000 additional visitors to the Refuge in its first year of operation. The Refuge relies on volunteers to staff the Plankhouse; it is currently open only on a limited basis. The CCP will explore strategies to increase interpretation and education programs at the Plankhouse. The Refuge also contains significant cultural resources. The Cathlapotle village site is the best preserved archaeological site in the area. Protection of the site will therefore receive priority consideration in the CCP.

Comments or questions? Contact us

Address comments, questions, and requests for further information to:

Jennifer Brown, Refuge Manager
Ridgefield NWR Complex
PO Box 457
Ridgefield, Washington 98642
(360) 887-4106

Comments may be faxed to (360) 887-4109, or e-mailed to:

FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov

Please put "Ridgefield NWR CCP" on the subject line.



Cathlapotle Plankhouse (USFWS Photo)

What's Next? Upcoming Meetings and Milestones

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| Planning Update #2 (Summary of public scoping) | February 2007 |
| Open house—review of preliminary alternatives; Planning Update #3 | June 2007 |
| Public Review of Draft CCP; Planning Update #4 | May 2008 |
| Response to public comments on Draft CCP | July 2008 |
| Distribution of the Final CCP; final planning update | December 2008 |



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